DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 077 971 TM 002 780

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TITLE The Integration of Survey Research and Field Work: Contributions to Data Collection.
PUB DATE 73
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at a symposium of annual meeting of American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, Louisiana, February 25-March 1, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Data Analysis; *Data Collection; Educational Research; *Measurement Techniques; *Research Design; *Sociometric Techniques; Speeches

ABSTRACT

Two distinct traditions have developed around the two leading methods of social research, i.e., surveys and field work. Because of the rivalry between the proponents of these two methods, there has been little opportunity to explore the advantages of combining them in a single project. Most sociological research either utilizes a single method of investigation or assigns a second to an extremely weak role. Examples from the literature and from the author's own research demonstrate how the interplay of the two methods may greatly improve design, data collection, and analysis. Educational research has been notoriously weak in both of these methods, placing greater emphasis on experimental designs and tests and measurements. (Author)

ED 077971

TM 002 780

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THE INTEGRATION OF SURVEY RESEARCH AND FIELD WORK: CONTRIBUTIONS TO DATA COLLECTION

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In a paper written several years ago I noted that the advantages of integrating surveys and qualitative field methods are seldom recognized and rarely exploited. And indeed, it would appear that most social research either utilizes only a single method of investigation, or assigns a second to an extremely weak role. To demonstrate the benefits that flow from the integration of these techniques, I gave examples of research wherein one method had contributed to the other in each of three phases: (1) Research design, (2) Data collection, and (3) Analysis. In the present paper I will elaborate on the contributions of qualitative field methods to survey data collection by reference to my own recent research in which efforts were made to exploit the integration of these techniques. But first let me review the history of the separation of field work and surveys.

Prior to World War II, field work (by which I mean participant observation), informant interviewing and use of available records to supplement these techniques, predominated in social research. Such classics as the Hawthorn studies, the Middletown volumes, the Yankee City series and the Chicago studies of deviant groups (not to mention the anthropological contributions), attest to the early preeminence of field work. Following the war, the balance of work shifted markedly to

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surveys. This shift was largely a consequence of the development of public opinion polling in the 'thirties. Mostelier, Cantril, Likert, Stouffer and Lazarsfeld were perhaps the major developers of the newer survey techniques.

With the rapid growth of this vigorous infant, there emerged a polemic between the advocates of the older field methods and the proponents of the newer survey techniques. In fact, two methodological subcultures seemed to be in the making, one professing the superiority of "deep, rich" observational data and the other the virtures of "hard, generalizable" survey data. That the field workers were more vocal about the informational weaknesses of surveys than were survey researchers with respect to field work suggests the felt security of the latter and the defensive stance of the former. An extreme point in the polemic was reached by Becker's and Geer's statement that ". . .the most complete form of the sociological datum, after all, is the form in which the participant observer gathers it. . ." Such a datum gives us more information about the event under study than data gathered by any other sociological method. . ." (Becker and Geer, 1957, p. 28).

This position was strongly contested in a rebuttal by Trow (1957) who pointed out that no single technique could claim a monopoly on plausibility of inference; and, indeed, as Trow argued, many sociological observations can be made only on the basis of a large population. In his brief rebuttal, Trow did not seek to propose a scheme for determining the suitability of field work or survey research for the collection of given types of data. This task was undertaken a few years later by Zelditch (1962) who applied the criteria of efficiency and informational

adequacy to surveys, participant observation and informant interviewing in gathering three kinds of data: (1) Frequency distributions, (2) Incidents and histories, and (3) Institutionalized norms and statuses. Thus, if the objective is to ascertain a frequency distribution, then the sample survey or census is the "prototypical and best form," but not so with incidents and histories, which render the survey both "inefficient and inadequate," according to Zelditch. This contribution was a long step forward in mediating between the two historically antagonistic styles of research.

But even this formulation showed the traces of an assumption that undergirded the earlier polemic, namely, that one uses either survey or field methods. The fact of the matter is that these techniques are sometimes combined in the same study. If all three types of information noted by Zelditch are sought within the framework of a single investigation, then all three techniques are properly called into play. In such cases, the inefficiency of a survey for studying institutionalized norms and statuses falls by the wayside: if one is conducting a survey anyway, then why not proceed to measure norms and statuses in the questionnaire? Likewise with the investigation of incidents and histories by means of a survey.

It is curious that so little attention has been paid to the intellectual and organizational problems and prospects of integrating different methods. A few methodologists have sought to compare the results of different approaches, but these endeavors were conceived within the traditional framework of mutually exclusive techniques, inasmuch as the problem was to determine the consequences of using <u>either</u> one <u>or</u> another technique.

The authors of a compendium of "unobtrusive measures" have noted our doggedness in viewing social research as a single-method enterprise, and make a plea for multioperationalism (Webb, et al., 1966). But they were prompted to raise the issue on the assumption that every technique suffers from inherent weaknesses that can be corrected only by cross-checking with other techniques. To be sure, there are areas of informational overlap between methods, but there are also large areas of information which can be gained only by a particular technique. If each technique has an inherent weakness, it also has an inherent strength unmatched by others. Therefore, by drawing upon its special strengths, one technique can contribute substantially to the utilization of the other. While this principle can be demonstrated for every phase of research, here we confine ourselves to the benefits of field work for survey data collection.

There are four ways in which qualitative field work can contribute to data collection in surveys. First, it can provide legitimation for a survey; second, it can afford a basis for formulating a sampling frame; third, it can contribute fundamentally to the development of the survey instrument; and last, it can be used to increase return rates.

1. Gaining Legitimation

It is well known that contacts with the leaders of a population will often smooth the way for contacts with followers. This applies to gaining legitimacy for a survey among followers as well as to gaining access for qualitative research purposes. If there are conflicts among leaders, of course, then the endorsement of only a single

leader may set a large number of people in opposition to the survey. But information about political in-fighting and other conflicts should come to the attention of a field worker in the normal course of informant interviewing or observation, thereby prompting him to gain endorsements in a way that will appeal to all sectors of the population. In social research on schools, leadership may reside in superintendents, school board members, union officials, heads of parent groups, principals or informal opinion leaders anywhere on the staff.

The importance of identifying and gaining support from the appropriate authority during the exploratory phase preceding a survey, and of grasping the political context in which approval is sought, are perhaps best demonstrated by a negative instance. Voss (1966) describes the case of a school survey that was terminated by the superintendent on the grounds that it was "unauthorized by the school." Although in reality the superintendent was responding to pressures from a group of right wing parents, the survey having been duly approved by lower level administrators, he was able to claim that he had not <u>personally</u> endorsed the study and could therefore cancel it. Voss concludes from this experience that ". . .lack of familiarity with the structure of the organization may spell disaster. . . The only means of avoiding such a problem is to obtain unequivocal support from the highest level possible."

Our own study of two suburban districts affords a case at the opposite end of the spectrum of cooperation. After conducting field work for several months in the schools, there was never really any question of gaining endorsements for the survey. Every administrator

in the two districts cooperated fully in urging teachers to respond and in collecting the completed questionnaires in a box in their outer office. And the many helpful, marginal comments of the teachers, some addressing the survey designer by name, suggested that the questionnaire was completed with uncommon seriousness. The return rate was about 90 percent of the entire staff.

The two project histories are not exactly parallel since Voss surveyed students rather than staff members, but the problems encountered by Voss are also faced in gaining access to school staff for survey research. Apparently, the impersonality of a survey can be counteracted by the respondent's personal acquaintance with the investigator and the goals of his study.

In a more recent study in which we employed part-time field observers to help us evaluate an educational extension system in three states, a great deal of qualitative data were gathered over the period of a year preceding our survey of clients of the service (Sieber, et al., 1972). Cassette tape recorders were used to record interactions between extension agents and school personnel, follow-up interviews with clients and the random observations of both agents and our observers. These tapes were then coded in our New York office and the responses placed on 3 x 5 cards for easy reference while preparing the questionnaire or writing reports. And it seems clear that the familiarity of clients with our observers substantially smoothed the way for our survey. Where the observers had established the highest rapport with clients, response to the survey was highest. Two of our observers were local professors of education who had contributed directly to the extension program by

organizing workshops or new courses, and these individuals were especially useful in gaining legitimation for our survey. Thus, in many instances the questionnaire was not viewed as a sudden intrusion from some remote university researchers, but as part of an on-going study with which many of the respondents were personally familiar through contact with our observers. And because of the close relations which had developed between observers and agents, the agents themselves vouched for the authenticity and value of the survey. Approximately a third of the clients responded to the first mailing of our eight page questionnaire without a follow-up letter. (Incidentally, one should bear in mind that these clients were mainly rural school teachers and administrators.) Further, in only one of the many school districts that received our questionnaire did we fail to gain the support of an administrator, and this occurred in an area where the field observer had had the poorest relationships with school personnel.

2. Formulating the Sampling Frame

In the course of conducting field work in the study mentioned above it had become clear that certain strategic subpopulations would have to be oversampled in order to treat them separately in our analysis. The importance of differentiating among these subpopulations was impressed upon us by the field work. For example, our field observers had found that experiences with administrators were quite different from those with teachers. Administrators were overwhelmed with reading material and therefore needed to be prodded to give serious attention to the information that was delivered to them by the extension agents. Also,

their informational needs were more often for long range planning than for immediate application. Thus, the information they received was of a very special character. Finally, because of the importance of their gatekeeper role, which had emerged quite clearly from field observations, it occurred to us that their satisfaction with the service might be more significant than the satisfaction of their teaching staff, even though the latter might outnumber them by 10 to 1. For these reasons we decided to take a 100 percent sample of administrators in the rural areas of the three states. Similar observations of specialists prompted us to build them into the design as a separate group--which then raised the knotty problem of differentiating between specialists and administrators on the basis of mere formal titles in the state directories. In sum, experiences in the field demonstrated the advisability of adopting a sampling design based on certain status and job differentials.

3. Contributions to the Questionnaire

It is difficult to imagine how we could have formulated our questionnaire in the survey mentioned above without the long period of intensive observation which preceded it. Since the extension program was unique in education, we could not fall back on other studies or experiences. Let me give just one dramatic example of how our field work dictated an item which one would have considered doubtful without the contribution of our field observers.

We gave the respondents a checklist of nine different activities or traits of the field agents and invited them to appraise the agent on each of these criteria. A five point scale was used with the option of

saying that the activity did not occur at all. One of these criteria was "understanding of his role or job." When we submitted our questionnaire for clearance, a USOE official in the forms management office responded that the item was meaningless because respondents could not possibly appraise a field agent's understanding of his role. Now, for a year we had been listening to tape recorded sessions with clients in which the agents had sought to explain their job. Frequently the clients reacted with confusion, and occasionally the agents themselves professed their own uncertainty. And in our interviews with clients, several felt that the agents did not know what their proper duties were. This was indeed the case because the role was entirely new to both client and agent, and it was quite evident that the role could not be performed unless there was consensus between agent and client about its goals and limitations. In short, it did not take much sophistication for a client to realize than an agent was unable to understand or articulate his role.

The item was retained in the final questionnaire, making it possible to measure the extent to which role definitions were still problematic after a year of working in the field. In fact, it was isolated statistically as one of two items concerned with what we later called "presentation of self and program." These two items were not only the most frequently observed, but received the highest marks from clients in their appraisal of the agents. This finding showed that regardless of how ambiguous and troublesome the field agent role was at the outset, a year's experience was sufficient for it to have taken firm shape.

Our field observers were also quite helpful in making suggestions for the questionnaire. In one case an observer sent us a short checklist of different aspects of the program to which clients might have been exposed. The checklist was incorporated into the questionnaire for all clients. Of course, the observers were also available for pretest interviewing, and as a result of this input hardly a single item remained in its original form. In sum, without the assistance and direct input of our field observers who had become experts on all phases of the program the survey instrument would have been seriously defective.

4. Increasing the Return Rate

The use of field representatives to increase return rates was clearly demonstrated in our survey of school of education deans in 1965. In most universities we were able to commission junior faculty in sociology departments to deliver the questionnaire, explain its intent, assist in filling it out, retrieve it and review it for complete responses, and then forward it to our office. Since the questionnaire was about 25 pages in length and requested a good deal of statistical data, the use of field representatives appeared to be obligatory. And indeed the difference in return rates between schools with and without field representatives was about 40 percent. Clearly, had we failed to recruit field representatives, our survey response would have been so poor that the data would have been worthless.

In our more recent study of extension agents, the field observers were sent the names of all nonrespondents after two follow-up letters

and requested to call them by telephone or speak to them on their visits in the schools. In all areas the response rate increased by approximately 15 percent after the observers had contacted the clients. The final return rates from each of the three states was 61 percent, 77 percent and 85 percent. In order to study response bias, a one page questionnaire was mailed to collect background information and inquire about satisfaction with the service. Including responses to this one page instrument, the overall response rates were 72 percent, 86 percent and 93 percent respectively in the three states. Without the legitimizing and follow-up roles of our field observers, it is highly doubtful that we could have succeeded in reaching this largely rural population with our survey.

Concluding Remarks

The neglect of field work by survey researchers is most unfortunate, not only because certain data are missed, but also because the survey itself will suffer. The necessity of overcoming cynicism toward survey research, of identifying subpopulations for sampling purposes, of fitting the questionnaire to the respondents' frame of reference and of inducing reluctant or busy respondents to return questionnaires dictate the use of qualitative field work for data collection purposes. At the very least, field representatives are often methodologically obligatory. Until such time as multiple techniques are applied, the results of most of our survey research will remain plausible rather than conclusive.

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